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ABSTRACT

A research project investigated the efficacy of reading methods utilized when a writer was on a sabbatical in the Shandong Province, People's Republic of China, teaching an Oral English Workshop for Chinese teachers of English at Yantai University. At the beginning of the project, students were assessed and placed into three levels based on their ability to answer oral questions. The curriculum included such techniques as letter writing, storytelling, reading of periodicals and newspapers, nature walks, singing, "jazz chants," verbal games and jokes, and collaborative projects. Students indicated, in an evaluation at the end of the course, that they profited most from storytelling, role playing, direct instruction and practice in phonology, collaborative group work, and the modeling of teaching methods. Students also indicated that they wanted more work in American literature, especially stories, essays and articles on American history, and more variety in magazines and information about American customs. They did not, however, care for studying the texts with essays and stories on American life, preferring text involving role playing in order to learn polite conversation in American society. (PRA)

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TEACHING READING METHODS: THEIR USES, INCLUDING SUCCESSES AND FAILURES, WHEN TEACHING CHINESE TEACHERS ORAL ENGLISH

by
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Abstract. This research project identifies reading methods utilized, some successfully while others were not, when the writer was on a sabbatical in the Shandong Province, Peoples Republic of China, teaching an Oral English Workshop for Chinese teachers of English during the Summer of 1991, at Yantai University.

Introduction. During the Summer of 1991, I was privileged to be a member of a team of ten selected to teach an Oral English Workshop at Yantai University in Yantai, Peoples Republic of China, which is located on the Yellow Sea in Northeast China. Each day for eighteen days I taught my class of Chinese students, a class of seven high school English teachers, one university librarian, one international interpreter for a local fishing company, one undergraduate English major and one university English department employee for three hours beginning at 7:30 AM. This early morning schedule concluded with lunch and a rest period followed by a 2:00 PM lecture for all ten classes of workshop students and instructors in which the American instructors took turns lecturing on various aspects of

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American Culture for an hour. The fifth and final hour of the teaching day was for discussion of the preceding lecture with each of the ten instructors meeting at least once with each of the ten classes. This meant that during the fifth hour my regular morning class attended another instructor's session so that they could practice oral communication with another instructor who had a slightly different American English accent or dialect. In this paper I will discuss the various methods utilized when instructing my students in their Oral English development--some methods were complete failures while others were most successful. Most of these methods were taken directly from my teacher education courses in reading and language development at the college where I teach at the undergraduate/graduate levels.

Assessment. After their arrival on campus, the students came to the academic building for an informal assessment. Another instructor and I, working as partners, devised a list of questions which the two of us used in brief conversations with our prospective students. We had enough questions so that all students would not have the same ones, thus preventing preparation of those questioned toward the end of the assessment session by those questioned earlier.

Then, students were placed into three levels by the following criteria:

Rating 1: Students understood the oral questions and answered correctly.

Rating 2: Students partially understood the oral questions and answered somewhat correctly.

Rating 3: Students did not understand the oral questions.

As you can tell, there was much room for error in the assessment! However, once in class if students performed differently in either direction, they were reassigned to a more appropriate level.

Based on the above ratings, students were quickly placed in classes to begin the next day. Each student was issued copies of the materials which consisted of three thin texts two with several brief essays or stories on various aspects of American culture and activities followed by comprehension and discussion questions. The remaining text consisted of explanations with role playing activities concerning expressions of polite cordialities and responses typical in American society, such as how to compliment someone's hair style. Also, instructors shared as many supplementary materials on aspects of American society as their suitcases had allowed them to bring with them.

Methods of Instruction. Like most first week's classes, I spent the week getting acquainted with my students, the schedule, the teaching materials and how and what to supplement and adjusting to and incorporating their and my cultural differences into the classroom learning. Hence, the first item of business was discussing with students what they expected and/or wanted to get from the summer workshop. They stated their main desires were to improve their English speech and to learn American English idioms. I asked if they wanted to be called by their Chinese names or be given American names. They had difficulty trying to make a decision but seemed (I'm not sure if they liked the idea or if they were being too polite to tell me their real preference.) to like the idea of American names. Thus, I tried to give each a name that had some similarity to his or her Chinese name such as "Guo" was called "Gary" and "Howe" was called "Howard." They practiced and seemed to enjoy having different but similar names as there were some smiles and chatter--in Chinese! Then, our discussion took a more serious turn.

I gave them a letter of introduction telling about my work, community, home and family. They read the letter along

with me and paid attention to my explanations of various parts but there seemed to be little enthusiasm. For homework I asked them to write a similar letter to me. This was followed by silence. Then, I asked them to talk with me and tell why they had decided to take this course as well as a little about themselves. Gradually, beginning with one student opening up, I discovered that their presence in the workshop was probably not of their own choosing and that they were very homesick. They begin to elaborate on leaving their spouses, child (the Chinese are allowed one child per couple) and extended families--they were not used to travel and separation from family. It was becoming abundantly clear that they did not want to be at Yantai University in that workshop! Motivation was one problem that I had never anticipated! However, they were talking in English and listening to English, while I was learning to speak more slowly and clearly, to listen with comprehension (even though I had to ask them to repeat many times in those first few days) and with much compassion. Improvement in cross-cultural communication through oral English was fast developing. However, at this point, I was so dissolutioned over the lack of initiative, that I was unaware of the learning already taking place!

In the final hour of our first lonely day together, a student stated that he would like for us to take a walk. I immediately introduced the term, "nature walk," and all of us arose and went outdoors to begin our first light hearted and fun activity. Everyone in the class talked pointing to various plants, buildings and areas and asking, "What do you call this in America?" or "Do you have a hand sign that means okay?" This provided opportunity to teach the "thumbs up" as well as the "thumbs down" hand signals. Suddenly, there were smiles everywhere as we were all huddled over bushes and flowers in the "commons" area giving each other the "thumbs up" signal for our communication efforts. Class bonding had begun!

The remainder of week one was spent developing day one's occurrences. Each student wrote a lengthy letter telling of his or her home, family, community and work. Also, all expressed appreciation for my presence in their classroom and for most, I was the first foreigner they had ever met! I had individual conferences with each student to discuss the content of their letters and the few written errors each made--they wrote well! On most days we took a "nature walk" which included a tour of the library (one student worked

there and got permission for us to enter the library and to take us on a tour), a long walk on the beach (which bordered the campus), the campus gardens and lake. The students and I took many pictures which they had developed and shared in the next two weeks of classes. This lead to more picture taking sessions--always outdoors--and of course, many more "nature sharing times." There was a requirement of "English only" during these walks. Even though students did not always obey this rule their speed and ability to communicate in Oral English was rapidly improving as we worked informally on pronouncing difficult sounds and word parts amid laughter and cheerful reminders of correct pronunciation. They obviously were beginning to form good friendships with each other as well as with me! By the end of week one, motivation was no longer my worry. The students had solved that problem by helping develop their own curriculum by working together and with me. They were becoming very involved with each other and their learning!

By week two, the daily curriculum had been developed with the students' input and my guidance. Each morning as we began our three hours of classwork, students read portions of essays chorally until synchronized on most words, practiced (chorally) sounds that had been mispronounced by

individual students, compared/contrasted information on American culture, gleaned from reading essays and other sources, with Chinese culture. From these discussions, much was learned about each other's country's customs, habits and everyday lives.

At least one hour every morning was spent in role playing activities. Usually these situations were read and acted out or planned and acted out by pairs or small groups of students; generally they involved using proper etiquette in social situations such as saying "Hellos," "Good-byes" and conducting introductions, etc. It took several days for students to get used to collaborative work as well as role playing in informal classroom situations. However, this collaborative work in an informal classroom was a method that proved to be one in which they enjoyed. Also, they expressed appreciation in learning this information as well as learning the role playing method in which they were responsible for planning their roles then acting in them. At the end of the course, the students stated this was one of the most difficult activities but most valuable in what they learned about oral response functioning in American society. They also stated that role playing was a method

they definitely planned to use with their students when they returned to their classrooms.

Another activity my students began to anticipate and enjoy during the second week was storytelling. I would place four pictures that accompanied a story in one of the texts in mixed up order in front of the classroom. After studying them very carefully (they would get out of their seats, go to the pictures and study each), students volunteered to tell the imaginary story created on the spot and rearrange the pictures to accompany their stories. Every story was different throughout the entire summer! During this activity, their was much laughter as the students began using each other as characters in their made-up stories. Also, this was a time when idioms and vocabularies increased as I and each of them would help the storyteller when she or he seemed to be searching for just the right word or phrase to describe an incident or portion of their creations. The students stated that this was their favorite academic activity throughout the summer and one they were anxious to incorporate into their own teaching. In fact, they paid for and copied these materials to take home (they already had copies of all texts used except this). Other instructors used this same idea with magazine pictures (students

described and made up stories about these) and reported that their students responded very positively to the activity which dramatically increased students' oral communication contributions with the class.

Each week I tried to add an extra activity for interest and diversion to the class routine. During week two, I introduced American newspapers and magazines to the class. They divided into cooperative groups of two to three students for a research and report project to be completed by the week's end. Each group selected something they wanted to purchase and reported on why they selected that item(s) and its price. This turned into a very interesting project as they selected cars, homes, groceries and other items from the advertisements. Their vocabularies increased daily as they read the advertisements they would ask questions such as, upon reading a car advertisement, "What does AC stand for and power steering, too?" Then, there were other concepts taught such as "installment payment plan" and purchasing quantities of groceries for an entire week of American meals! The latter came after studying glossy restaurant menus with pictures so they understood what a typical American meal on a standard sized plate (the Chinese use a saucer for a plate and refill it many times

during the meal) was and how to plan for a week of meals in the right quantities of food (mass refrigeration in America was another new concept). Many discussions took place among students and instructor for these projects to be completed. The classroom was buzzing (mostly in English) throughout the week during this activity! Students worked at making careful decisions based on their own desires and reasons. The brief written and oral reports at the end of the week were very interesting!

The third week was a continuation of the basic academic work and of course, the "nature walks" but a new project was introduced--singing! The students made copies of my stack of songs and asked to be taught the tune of various songs (their music is written in a different music language, hence, they could not read nor follow the music notes of our songs). The singing improved their pronunciation as well as their understanding of song stories since they questioned various meanings. In addition, they had fun! All of the class and I laughed at our awkwardness as amateur performers but shyness was overcome and two students with talented voices emerged! They began singing Chinese songs for the class, with English interpretations given afterwards in

addition to becoming our class's song leaders! I was glad to have saved this activity for the last week as it added pizzaz to the class atmosphere as the end of our time together was fast approaching and a hint of sadness was beginning to creep into our thoughts.

Another activity that students wanted to take home to teach their students was "Jazz chants." This activity featured students rhythmically repeating poetic lines on everyday activities such as "How old are you? I'd rather not say." This question with a socially correct response was repeated along with many others in this chant concerning questions that Americans generally consider rude to ask but how to politely respond negatively if someone does ask. Apparently the students felt this was a good way to teach socially acceptable questions and responses for American society in a fun rhythmic activity while improving oral English. However, my Chinese students never seemed to enjoy the chants; they did the activity only when I insisted but I thought it a complete failure until they asked for copies to use with their students. Apparently they felt it was a worthwhile activity for their younger adolescents Chinese students!

In order for students to arrange for their transportation home, the final eight days of classes went straight without a weekend break. I had dreaded this stretch of days but found them to be extremely rewarding academically as well as emotionally. Academically, the students were beginning to speak with much fluency by the third week. They began playing verbal games and jokes on me and each other. Some of these were universal in nature, such as, when a student asked me to close my eyes and hold out my hand as he had a present for me. When I did so he placed a live sand crab in my hand! Other jokes and stories told were Chinese in nature such as telling folklore tales or childhood stories about their growing up days. With these stories, work, walks, laughter and conversations came the emotional bonding between the students and me. By this time neither the students nor I had to ask many repetitions for communication to process, and oral English was spoken much more smoothly and faster. Other instructors who had my students for discussions in the afternoon, stated that they could understand and be understood without much repetition; so it was carrying over outside of my classroom! Also, by this time they were asking many questions about America, about America's political parties, religions, travels, homes,

teenagers, schools, jobs, customs and foods. It was an interesting and deeply satisfying eight days of much interactive communication and learning.

Another new activity which they incorporated into their own behavior by the third week was collaboration. They met in groups to arrange a last day party for the class, to make copies of all pictures that they had taken throughout the workshop, to locate a xeroxing machine and plan for the copying, sorting and paying for all materials.
I stepped in periodically to help with organization or to make explanations especially during the party with explanations on the proper use of napkins, placemats and other items in a table setting and demonstrating aspects of American dining etiquette. These collaborative projects were not ordered by me or anyone else, they made the decisions to do and decided how to do them as a group. I had wanted for them to take over decision making responsibilities with class projects in the previous two weeks but they had shown no initiative and seemed to expect me to tell them how to conduct every portion of each activity. I had tried in research activities and in asking them to express their own opinions about various topics, but they were still very hesitant in such activities and I still had to be in charge.

So, when they set up their own plans for in class work and time, I was jubilant! Thus, decision making, planning and carrying out responsibilities in collaborative efforts were further accomplishments of the class that my Chinese students said they wanted their students to learn to do when they returned to their classrooms and teaching duties. When they expressed desires for their students to begin group work, we spent some time discussing how to do this in large classes of at least sixty students (The Chinese high school English class sizes ranged, for the teachers in my class, from 60 to 120 students).

When asked to evaluate the program my students politely but readily stated their opinions in what they had liked, learned from and what they would like to see added to future Oral English Workshops. They liked storytelling with and without pictures to illustrate, role playing emphasizing social situations, direct instruction and practice in phonology to improve their speech, especially when on "nature walks," collaborative group work, the modeling of teaching methods for them which they learned in each of the activities mentioned just by being in class and the discussions on American customs and society. But, they wanted more work in American literature, especially short

stories and essays and articles on American History. Also, they wanted more variety in magazines and more information about American customs such as discussions and demonstrations of a traditional table setting and dining etiquette. They stated that they wished we had had access to a tape recorder and audio tapes so each could have taken a tape home with my and the other instructors' speech, and song tunes as well as recordings of their own speech throughout the workshop. They did not care for studying the essays and stories and answering the questions for the two texts with essays on American life, nor did they like the choral readings. But, they did like the text involving role playing in order to learn polite conversation in American society.

During and after graduation ceremonies in which our students received certificates on completion of the Oral English Workshop many tears were shed amidst hugs of farewell and a new understanding of our two cultures. As in classrooms in America I, once again, was reminded that learning takes place by both teacher and students and that much more is learned than the course's designated curriculum. Our curriculum was designed to teach oral English amid contexts

of American culture. In addition, the instructors were to model current teaching methods in American schools. All was accomplished as my students seemed to learn this quickly. But the extras that came out in my classroom were my joy in watching students go from agonizing over simple decision making into confidently verbally expressing to foreigners and natives alike, what they think, what they wanted in class, in their lives and what they did not want. Another joy was seeing and feeling camraderie evolving into joyful motivation in planning and accomplishing together. And finally, especially for those who were teachers, hearing their thoughts and plans on creating classroom situations to incorporate new methods, materials and knowledge into their lives and jobs so that their students' learning would not be by rote and meaningless, was very reassuring to me that much was accomplished during the workshop. I left China with a new appreciation for the Chinese people, teachers and culture and feeling assured that they went home feeling the same about American people, teachers and culture! Because of this experience my life and teaching will never be the same and I do not think theirs will be either.